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EASTERN

F.O.
371

1947

PALESTINE

File No. 521

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Negeb by Sir Douglas Harris who is an authority on this question. I think the Secretary of State would be interested to read it.

While it would appear that the Negeb is useless to the Jews from the point of view of immigration its possession by them would involve all sorts of strategic, political and other considerations. Mr. Baxter has pointed out some of these in his minute.

R.S.A.
20th January, 1947.

Private Secretary

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January 14th, 3
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Dear Harold,

A great deal of misleading prop-
aganda is being put out nowadays con-
cerning the potentialities of the Negeb.
I know the tract well and am astounded
at the descriptions of it which I some-
times read, descriptions obviously
written by people who have never been
near it.

I enclose a note in which I have
tried to put down, briefly and object-
ively, the true facts about this much
discussed area. I thought that you
might care to have a copy.

Yours ever,

Douglas Harris

H. Beeley Esq., C.B.E.

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presenting "a bare, pale aspect, such as one might expect to find in the Moon". Few people have penetrated into the tract and Mr. Kirk tells how a Moslem from Gaza who accompanied him, and had expected the whole country to be like the rolling plains south-east of Gaza, was appalled by the sight of these miles of rocky emptiness.

6. No portion of this area has an average annual rainfall of more than four inches, while much of it has less than two; in other words, it is practically rainless. Some of the valleys have retained a little soil in their beds; in a few cases this is sufficient to support small areas of precarious agriculture but for the most part it does no more than bear a scanty growth of scrub, which provides winter pasture for the goats and camels of a few poor tribes. The extreme scarcity of water operates to reduce population to a minimum; the total population of the tract is believed not to exceed 1,000 nomads.

7. Much has been made of the discovery of the ruins of Byzantine towns in the area and pictures have been drawn of an erstwhile flourishing civilisation there, raising the question why this condition should not be reproduced today. These pictures receive, however, little support from archaeologists. There were six such towns, Khalasa, Ruheibe, Auja, Sbeita, Abda and Qurnub, the position of which is shown on the map. Mr. Avi-Yonah, of the Palestine Archaeological Department, after a full examination of the sites, estimates that the whole tract may have supported a population of a maximum of 80,000 to 100,000 souls. Most elaborate precautions, involving great skill and labour, were taken to store every drop of water in order to provide sustenance for this number, but even so Mr. Avi-Yonah calculates that the water supply at Sbeita, with a population of 8,000 to 10,000 persons, cannot have yielded more than about a third of a gallon per person per day. Life in the tract must then, as now, have been extremely difficult.

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8. One of the puzzles of the Negeb towns is why they came into existence and Mr. Kirk has recently put forward a theory to account for them. He suggests that the population of the southern Negeb in Roman times lived there not because they liked it but because a totalitarian central government forced them to do so. He thinks it likely that they were "armed settlers planted there under military discipline, obliged to provide their own livelihood and, in defending it, act as a first line of defence for the province". He points out that there is no evidence of any settled population or of any comparable activity in the tract in the centuries either before or after the Roman occupation. "It is surely no coincidence" he writes "that it occurred in the one period when the country was subject to a strong central government. The inference is that the government compelled the settlers to win a living from this harsh land, and that its object in settling them there was primarily strategic rather than economic".

9. The possibility of agricultural development in the area is wholly excluded and, unless minerals are discovered in it (which there is no reason to think probable) it offers no advantages for development of any other kind. It could hardly be more inaccessible and day to day arrangements would be necessary to supply the settlers with food and water in order to provide even the most primitive standards of livelihood. It is safe to say that, viewed as an area capable of absorbing new immigration, the southern Negeb must be written off as useless.

10. This brings us to the northern Negeb, where the soil washed down from the southern hills has been deposited to form the Beersheba plain, shown in green on the map. This area is about 725,000 acres in extent and contains about 410,000 acres of cultivable land, a considerable portion of the plain being covered by a block of shifting sand. Excavation has shown that there was already sand at Khalasa in the third to the fourth century A.D. Of this cultivable area, every acre that can be economically sown

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is already cultivated by its present Beduin owners. These Beduin are keen farmers and very much alive to the possibility of improving their agricultural methods. Tractor ploughing has made considerable strides within recent years and an increasing area is being planted each year with fruit trees.

11. The population of the area is not exactly known but it was estimated to be 51,082 at the 1931 census. Registration of births and deaths is not carried out among the Beduin, but if the population has increased at the same rate as the Moslem population of the rest of Palestine, it must now be about 75,000 persons, representing some 17,000 families. The average holding of cultivable land is thus about 25 acres a family.

12. This area certainly cannot be regarded as excessive. The average annual rainfall in the tract is less than twelve inches and is subject to considerable fluctuation, being often entirely inadequate. It is generally accepted that, in a cycle of seven years, the crops in the northern Negeb fail completely in two years on account of drought, suffer from semi-failure in three and produce a good crop in two years only. In other words, the cultivator raises $3\frac{1}{2}$ full crops in seven years, storing the surplus obtained in a good year for consumption in a bad one, so that the real value of a family holding is equivalent only to about 12 acres elsewhere in Palestine. This area is much below any reasonable subsistence area of cereal land of the nature here in question.

13. There is thus no scope for further population in the northern Negeb unless intensive cultivation can be introduced and of this there is no present prospect. The rainfall is so scanty and so precarious that no reliance can be placed on it and any extension of cultivation must therefore depend upon the provision of an additional and assured water supply. An attempt made in 1935 to store water by means of a dam across one of the typical/

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typical valleys proved a failure as the soil was found to be so porous that practically the whole supply was lost either in the catchment or in the reservoir. A survey of the area was therefore put in hand in order to ascertain whether sub-soil water, which could be raised from wells, was available. The results were extremely disappointing. Of sixteen wells, sunk at sites which, as the result of prolonged geophysical and geological investigation, appeared to be exceptionally favourable, and some of which were driven to a depth of a thousand feet, fourteen were complete failures and the water in the other two was so saline that the possibility of making any use of it is doubtful. The survey proved conclusively that there is no prospect of any large-scale development in the northern Negeb dependent on sub-soil water.

14. Nor is there any better prospect of large-scale development dependent on surface flow. A few small schemes for the diversion of occasional floods may be possible but suitable sites are few and far between. As regards canals, most of the plain is too high to be commanded and even the very optimistic Hays-Savage scheme admitted the impossibility of irrigating more than the north-west corner, shown in a darker shade of green on the map. The authors of the scheme further admitted that there was insufficient water in Palestine to provide for this area and that the irrigation proposed could only be effected if the Lebanon made water from the Litani available for the purpose. This is a most improbable assumption, first, because there are irrigation and hydro-electric schemes under consideration in the Lebanon which will require the whole supply of that river and, secondly, because there is little prospect that any Arab State would voluntarily make water available in order to promote further Jewish immigration into and settlement in Palestine.

15. The claim that there is wide scope for Jewish settlement in the Negeb is thus wholly without foundation, in the northern/

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northern portion because it is already carrying as large a population as it can or is likely to be able to bear, in the southern portion because there is neither soil nor water, nor indeed any other facility conducive to settlement. It is, however, usually found that, when the Jews refer to the Negeb, they are speaking not of the Beersheba Sub-district but rather of the heavily populated coastal plain of the Gaza Sub-district south of Isdud, the only portion of the coastal plain in which they have not already acquired large holdings. The position of their recently founded settlement, "Negba", which is shown on the map, supports this interpretation. This is no new undeveloped area, settlement in which requires to be judged by special standards; the problem here is the same as that of further Jewish settlement in any already thickly populated part of Palestine.

16. The statement, so often made for propaganda purposes, that nearly half of Palestine is still empty and available for settlement is roughly speaking true as regards its emptiness but altogether false and misleading as regards its availability for settlement.

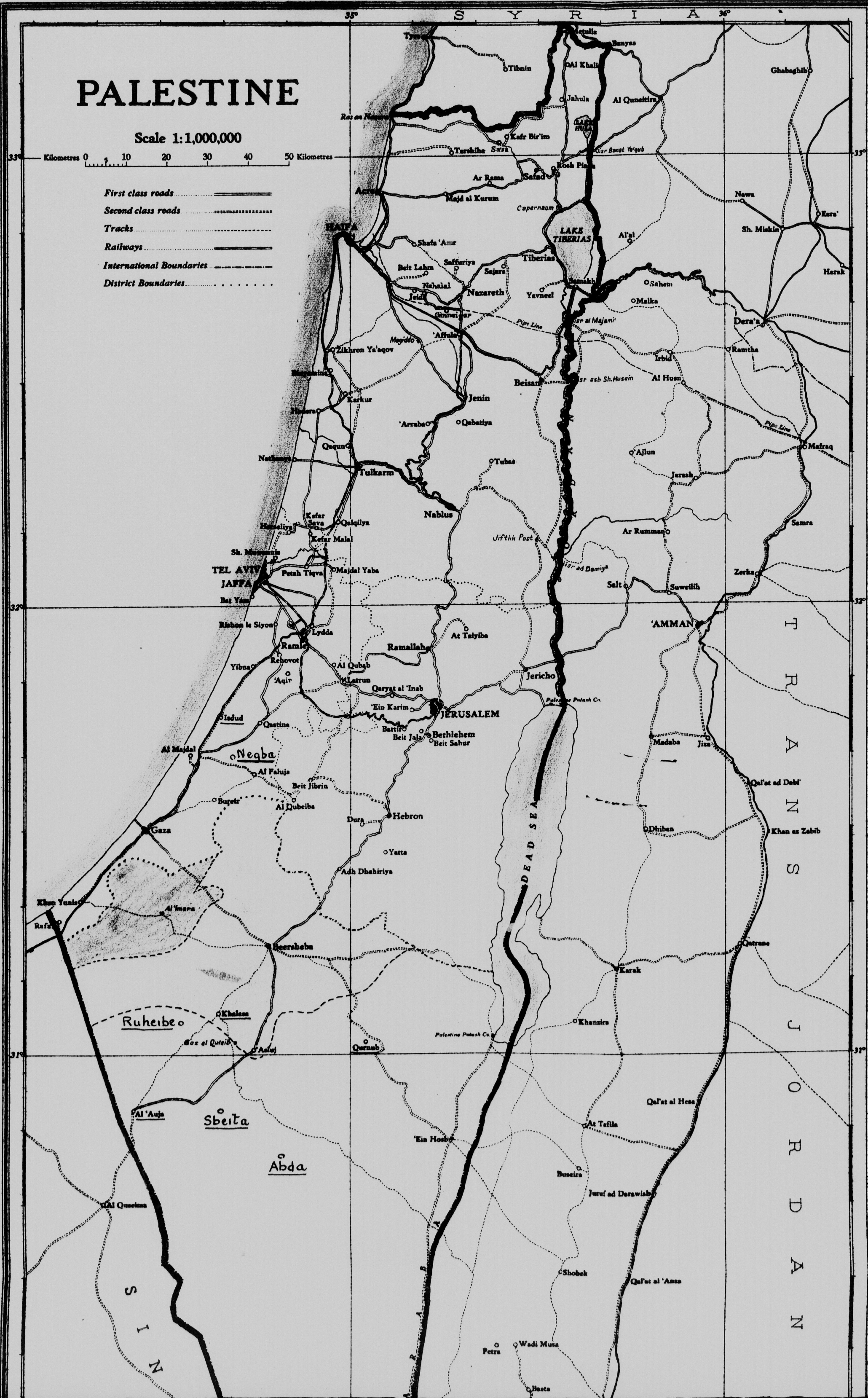
D. G. Harris
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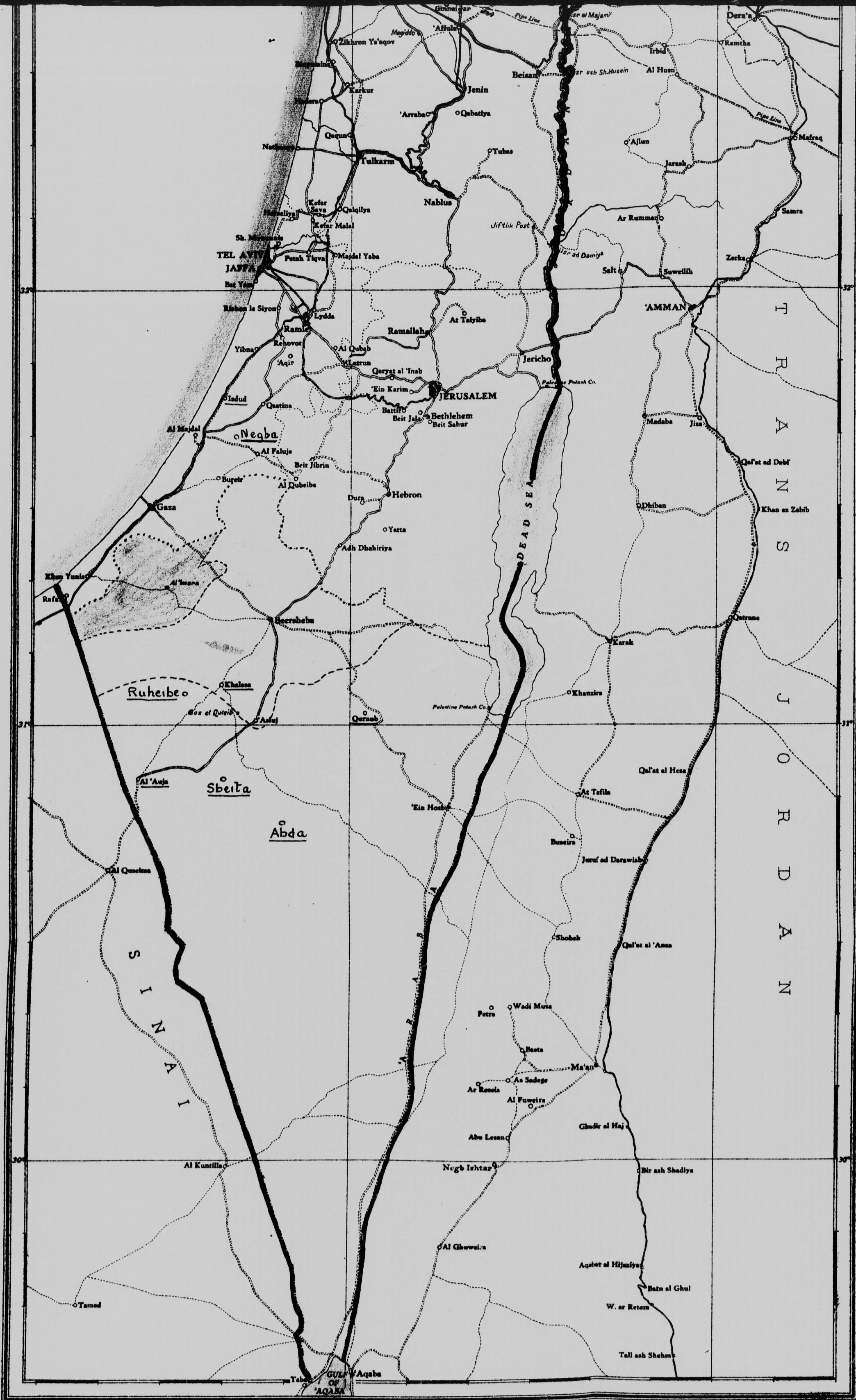
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Survey of Palestine Jaffa 1938.

Map P. 20/101

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